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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 000402

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SUBJECT: SHIA ISLAMIST PM CONTENDERS: NO PERFECT CANDIDATE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 148
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 294

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: None of the contenders for the Shia Islamist Coalition's prime minister nominee is ideal, and we will need to convince whoever the nominee is to construct a good set of structural agreements and program plans to address Iraq's deep problems. SCIRI's Adil Abd' al-Mahdi appears to have the best executive skills, based on his performance as Minister of Finance in the Allawi Government. However, Sunni Arab political leaders would prefer Shia Islamist Fadhila Party candidate Nadeem al-Jabiri over Abd al-Mahdi. In addition, the Kurdish KDP, worried about Iranian influence, does not want Abd al-Mahdi as Prime Minister coupled with Jalal Talabani as President. Moreover, Ayad Allawi has stated his unwillingness to serve in a government headed by Abd al-Mahdi.

[1](#)2. (S) SUMMARY CONTINUED: Incumbent PM Jafari's performance in office has offered little to justify his continued tenure. Nonetheless, he enjoys strong public support based on his excellent communication skills. While Jafari has always been open to listening to what USG officials have to say and is not pro-Iranian, he rarely follows through on politically difficult requests. Fadhila's Nadeem al-Jabiri appears to have the broadest cross-sectarian appeal and has demonstrated a readiness to consult closely with the United States. However, al-Jabiri has weak support among the general public, the Shia Coalition, and even his own party. TNA Deputy Speaker Shahrastani appears to have a smaller chance of being the Shia Coalition nominee. If the Coalition cannot agree, we could imagine influential Dawa figure Jawad al-Maliki emerging as a new contender. Both Shahrastani and al-Maliki support an especially hard line against Sunni Arab insurgents, and the premiership of either could increase sectarian differences. None of the Shia Islamist Coalition candidates for premiership presents an obvious quick fix to Iraq's political dysfunction. The next prime minister will play an important role in Iraq's political transition, but the future government's success will depend on the institutions of the new government as well as the individual at its helm (septel). END SUMMARY

ABD AL-MAHDI: BEST EXECUTIVE?

[1](#)3. (S) Adil Abd al-Mahdi could potentially act as a stabilizing influence in government if his performance as Prime Minister matched that of his ITG tenure as Minister of Finance. Embassy Baghdad found Abd al-Mahdi to be an effective Minister of Finance during the Allawi government. As a technocrat, he has worked well with the U.S., especially on economic issues when he was Finance Minister.

He worked closely with the Embassy's Economic section on restoring Iraqi relations with the IMF and the Tokyo Donors Conference, and assisted U.S. political goals during the constitution negotiations. He is a senior member of the driving force in the Shia Islamist Coalition (List 555), the SCIRI party. He has the support of Iraqi President and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani. Sunni Arab leaders like Tariq al-Hashimi and Khalaf al-Ayyan tell us that they prefer the Fadhila Party candidate, Nadeem al-Jabiri, over Abd al-Mahdi, but they prefer Abd al-Mahdi over incumbent PM Jafari.

DRAWBACKS FOR ABD AL-MAHDI

14. (S) However, Kurdish President and KDP leader Barzani fears Iranian influence and does not want Abd al-Mahdi as Prime Minister if Jalal Talabani is President. Moreover, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi has privately told Ambassador that he would not serve under Abd al-Mahdi. There also are questions about Abd al-Mahdi's standing within SCIRI; a PolOff who worked closely with Abd al-Mahdi during the constitution drafting process reported that he consistently deferred to SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim on major decisions.

15. (S) Abd al-Mahdi's key difficulty is the public perception of SCIRI as being too closely tied to Iran -- a cause for concern to the major political forces outside, and some within, the Shia Islamist Coalition. He appears to enjoy a good relationship with Tehran ? PolOffs report that during a recent trip to Iran President Ahmedinejad referred to him as "his professor on Iraq." The extent to

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which he would push back against hard Iranian pressure is not clear. Compared to either Hakim or Jafari, Abd al-Mahdi has a low public profile. A recent poll among Shia regions showed that 77 percent of respondents preferred Jafari as Prime Minister; only two percent preferred Abd al-Mahdi.

16. (S) In addition, questions remain as to whether he could effectively control the Badr Organization; it is not clear if Abd al-Mahdi could compel Badr Organization head Hadi al-Amari to relent on his militia's activities. Given SCIRI's links to Badr Corps, we doubt Abd al-Mahdi would encourage serious investigations of alleged human rights abuses at the Interior Ministry. SCIRI's holding the Prime Ministry would lessen its claim to have a security minister slot; this could give it less influence over day-to-day operations than it has now with the Interior Minister Bayan Jabr. However, in any real internal government conflict, the prime minister holds the top cards.

17. (S) As Prime Minister, Abd al-Mahdi likely would support al-Hakim's desire to move ahead rapidly on establishment of at least one federal region in southern Iraq. Such a move would set the stage for a divisive clash with the Sunni Arabs. If Abd al-Mahdi could generate more SCIRI outreach to Sunni Arabs he could alleviate some (not all) Sunni Arab concerns about Iranian manipulation of SCIRI.

PM JAFARI: GOLDEN TONGUE, LEADEN HAND

18. (C) Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari has demonstrated an unwillingness or inability to unify Iraqi political parties except in their opposition to him. The Kurds have publicly expressed their disappointment with his leadership; he and Kurdish President Jalal Talabani had difficulty working together. Jafari is an ineffective manager who has underperformed as Prime Minister: he failed to deliver on a

promised USD 50 million to Tal?Afar for reconstruction, to reform the public distribution system, and to abide by IMF preconditions by pushing through the fuel import liberalization law (exacerbating the fuel crisis). During his administration, Jafari has been unready to engage on Shia militia issues. His inability to manage his ministers became apparent when six of them disobeyed his direct order to remain in-country and chose instead to leave with President Talabani to attend the UNGA. He is unwilling to make hard decisions on important issues, preferring to push them further down the road.

¶9. (S) Jafari's best asset is his ability to speak to the Iraqi public. He regularly appears in the media and IRI polling data indicates that Jafari is the most popular politician in Iraq. He has excellent public speaking skills, and a poetic command of Arabic. On a recent trip to Ramadi (see ref a), he used his rhetorical skill to sway a skeptical Sunni Arab audience.

¶10. (C) We have seen no evidence that Jafari is heavily influenced by Iran; he once asked Iran for compensation for the Iraq-Iran war. He has also shown no willingness to engage Iran on a renegotiation of the 1975 Shatt al-Arab agreement. While Jafari has always been open to listening to what USG officials have to say, only on a few occasions has he responded to difficult requests from us. For example, he reluctantly authorized Ahmed Chalabi to run the energy ministries and was lukewarm on instituting an increase in gas prices. He ignored our requests about de-Baathification, sensing the Shia political wind was blowing in the opposite direction. He was also willing to completely reorganize the top levels of the MOD and reassign division commanders right before the election on sectarian/partisan grounds.

¶11. (C) With a renewed Jafari administration, SCIRI would probably insist on heading one of the security ministries. His debt to the Sadrists for their support will also guarantee their control of the prominent service ministries and make it unlikely that Jafari would crack down on the Mahdi Army (just as it is difficult to imagine Abd al-Mahdi cracking down on Badr "Organization" abuses). Jafari's record on investigating current allegations of SCIRI-affiliated MOI abuse of detainees was weak and ineffectual. Sunni Arabs are more likely to balk on supporting a Jafari government and could therefore seek to draw out the negotiations on ministerial candidates. In fact, the Sunni Arabs, SCIRI, and the Kurds could probably promote harder-line candidates to take advantage of what would widely be perceived as weak Prime Ministerial leadership.

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AL-JABIRI: GOOD INSTINCTS BUT STRONG ENOUGH?

¶12. (S) Fadhila Party General Secretary Nadeem al-Jabiri is a dark horse UIC candidate with the strongest cross-sectarian appeal. He was the first UIC Prime Ministerial candidate to reach out to members of the Sunni Arab Tawafuq coalition. Kurdish President Barzani and former PM Allawi both support al-Jabiri. His candidacy would, however, cause great unhappiness among some elements of the Shia Coalition. Fadhila's roots lie in the rivalry between the party's spiritual leader, Ayatollah al-Yaqubi, and Muqtada al-Sadr over the claim to the mantle of succession to the latter's esteemed father Mohammed Sadiq Sadr. Muqtada's supporters would likely oppose al-Jabiri's candidacy.

¶13. (S) Nadeem al-Jabiri is, however, a weak man who does not command much support in Iraqi national politics, the Shia Coalition, or even his own party. While the Fadhila Party backs his candidacy, we do not sense among his cadres any desire to break with the Shia Islamist Coalition to

help al-Jabiri win the prize (see ref b). Instead, al-Jabiri's hints appear to be, at a minimum, bargaining. The Shia clerical establishment in Najaf would almost certainly not support Fadhila splitting from the Coalition. He has kept a rather low profile and has not made himself accessible to the Iraqi public. He does not score well in IRI opinion polls. Within the List 555 coalition his Fadhila Party is small in comparison to SCIRI and Dawa, and does not have nearly as large a support base as Abd al-Mahdi or Jafari. Within the Fadhila party, leaders such as Basrah Governor Mohammed Mossibh al-Wahili have seemed beyond the control of al-Jabiri's dictates. Certainly, if Ayatollah Yaqubi withdrew his support al-Jabiri's political career would end. Given these limits to al-Jabiri's influence, it is hard to imagine him making tough political decisions, such as reforming the Ministry of Interior, without huge backing from the United States.

¶14. (S) Nadeem al-Jabiri has proven willing to consult closely with us, however. Jabiri has expressed unease with Iranian influence in Iraq, and shows no evidence of close ties to Iran - a reason Sunni Arabs like him. For his part, Ayatollah Yaqubi is known to dislike Iranian-backed Ayatollahs in the Najaf Hawza. Jabiri has often billed himself as an Iraqi patriot who did not move to London or Tehran during the Saddam regime. (Instead, he remained in Iraq where he was a political science professor at Baghdad University.)

¶15. (S) Jabiri's reluctance to move far ahead on federalism would be helpful in calming Sunni Arab concerns. He says the right things about containing sectarian conflict, but we are not certain about his ability to deliver. Notably, if al-Jabiri becomes PM, we can expect SCIRI to lay claim to a good share of the sovereignty ministries, including the Ministry of Interior. The Sadrists may prove testy and demand more than their fair share of ministries in exchange for supporting a government led by a party they view as archrivals. Fadhila's Sadrist ideological roots, which include a version of "Islamic economics" based on social justice, could make al-Jabiri a weak partner in our efforts to encourage Iraqi economic reform.

SHAHRISTANI ? SCIENTIST WITH BIG AMBITIONS

¶16. (C) Deputy TNA Speaker nuclear scientist Hussein Al-Shahristani is the weakest PM candidate, with little perceived support outside some of the Shia Coalition independents. His very hard line on security issues would make it difficult for him to have a productive relationship with Sunni Arabs. As part of the Shia Coalition's "security committee," he has criticized Coalition forces for hindering MOI security operations. On the other hand, Shahristani has effectively and efficiently managed the TNA during the frequent absences of the Speaker, particularly during the waning days of the last session when he shepherded the 2006 Budget Law to passage. He has extreme views on Islam as the fundamental source of law, and is rumored to believe in the Khomeini-inspired doctrine underpinning Iran's theocratic state, vilayet al-faqih. We have seen no evidence of close ties to any foreign countries, although he spent significant time in Iran after his escape from Iraq in 1991. He is very articulate during meetings with U.S. officials, but he perceives the United States often to have interests in Iraq that do not match Iraq's. As an example, he expressed reservations on the

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timing and necessity for a fuel import liberalization law. He also let wither three bilateral economic agreements in order to focus on other issues.

DARK HORSE CANDIDATE: JAWAD AL-MALIKI

¶17. (S) Jawad al-Maliki (AKA Nuri Kamil or Abu Isra) could emerge as a dark horse candidate for the prime minister slot if opposition hardens against Adel Abd al-Mahdi and Jafari rises but fails to cement his position. Politicians on all sides fear the rise of SCIRI, but many fear more a repeat of Jafari's incompetent tenure. They could push for the Dawa Party to lead the government through Maliki instead of Jafari and attempt to convince Jafari to play a role similar to that of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. Jawad al-Maliki is already the official spokesman of the Shia Alliance and a member of a triumvirate (with Ali Adeeb and Jaafari) that runs the Dawa Party. As the former deputy speaker of the Iraqi Interim National Council and the chairman of the National Assembly's Security and Defense Committee, Maliki is considered one of the leading statesman of the National Assembly and one of the Iraqi government's most tireless operators.

¶18. (S) Maliki has deep concerns about expanding Iranian influence in Iraq learned during a career that has seen him often in conflict with the Iranian regime. He is also a hardline De-Baathification advocate, however, and often clashes with Sunni Arabs on that front. He is the deputy chairman of the De-Baathification Commission. His deep unease about Iranian intervention is matched only by his unease about the possibility of another Baathist Coup. As such he has worked tirelessly to double-check the work of the Jafari government and claims to have stopped several efforts to install Baathists into leading positions and alleged conspiracies to put unreliable Sunni Arab recruits into sensitive security positions in or around the Green Zone. He also advocates a hard fist against the Sunni Arab-dominated insurgency even at the expense of human rights violations. He cooperated strongly with U.S. diplomats to head off Sadrist efforts to create a Sovereignty Committee in the National Assembly that would have called for an immediate MNF-I withdrawal. In part due to Maliki's intervention, the committee was created and then defanged before any public damage could be done.

COMMENT

19 (S) None of the List 555 candidates for premiership presents an obvious quick fix to Iraq's political dysfunction. The above discussion raises questions about which at present we can only speculate: would the benefits of Abd' al-Mahdi's presumed effectiveness outweigh the disadvantages of a PM perceived as linked to Badr Corps and Iran? Could Abd al-Mahdi be prevailed upon to take a tough stand against his own party's militia? Would the unquestionable cost of Jafari remaining in office, with his well known track record of ineffectiveness, be greater than the risks of the comparatively unknown al-Jabiri? Would the right mix of competent ministers, representing all sectarian/ethnic groups, be able to manage around Jafari in his second term?

¶20. (S) What is clear is the importance of our continuing to stress principles of governance -- inclusiveness and qualified technocrats in key jobs such as the security, oil and finance ministries. Moreover, the next PM's relationship with his cabinet will depend on rules established during the negotiations to stand up the next government. (They will have to decide, for example, how much authority to vest in deputy prime ministers.) The individual who leads the government as prime minister will play an important role in Iraq's political transition, but the future government's success will depend on the institutions of the new government as well as the individual at its helm. Septel will provide thoughts on the kinds of principles and procedures of governance that we should seek.

KHALILZAD